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The Limitations of Summits around the Korean Peninsula

By Leif-Eric Easley

After the 2018 Winter Olympics held in South Korea, diplomatic summitry succeeded in pausing North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, alleviating US "maximum pressure," and reducing regional concerns about military conflict. Yet despite a historic meeting between Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June, and three reconciliatory meetings between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, North Korea has made scant progress on denuclearization.

In 2019, three different summits are demonstrating the limits of high-level diplomacy around the Korean Peninsula. A North Korea-China summit in January was less about solutions than maintaining influence in a fluid strategic environment. A second Trump-Kim summit may occur in February without sufficient working-level negotiations on the specifics of an agreement. And a needed South Korea-Japan summit is nowhere in sight, as bilateral relations are confounded by historical disputes.

Leif-Eric Easley, associate professor of international studies at Ewha University, explains that summits "can only reach so far beyond domestic political constraints and only temporarily bridge gaps between national interests."

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un made a fourth trip to China in January 2019. The optics of Kim's visit benefited both sides: projecting an image of North Korea as a member in good standing of a China-led regional order. However, rather than resolving policy differences, Xi and Kim's frequent meetings after years without a summit represent a willingness to settle: Beijing accepts North Korea's merely cosmetic denuclearization while Pyongyang only partially embraces Chinese-style economic reforms.

Yet Chinese and North Korean leaders do not portray their interactions as "agreeing to disagree" or "trading concessions." They claim to respect each other's bottom-line national interests and take a long-term evolutionary approach to bilateral relations. Each side understands how the other is important in international strategic positioning and particularly in negotiations with the United States. China and North Korea accommodate each other to present a united front against US-South Korea military exercises and to push for the weakening of international economic sanctions.

Some Chinese observers think closing ranks with North Korea is a mistake because they see the country's dynastic succession, human rights abuses, and economic system as anachronistic. China's policymakers have myriad suspicions about North Korea, including that the Kim regime will mismanage domestic governance or foreign policy, bringing instability to China's border. North Korea might again renege on business agreements or purge China-friendly North Korean elites. It could return to nuclear and missile testing with timing that embarrasses Beijing. Alternatively, it could deepen relations with South Korea and the United States to hedge against China. But Beijing has apparently de-emphasized these various sources of distrust because Chinese leaders refuse to fall behind Moon or Trump in improving relations with Pyongyang.

As for the possible second Trump-Kim summit, the main US agenda item remains North Korea's denuclearization. Concrete steps toward denuclearization include a declaration of nuclear sites and assets, commitment to a road map for dismantlement, and agreement to verification mechanisms. For the United States, a freeze could be an interim agreement on the path to denuclearization. In addition to a testing freeze, North Korea should halt production of nuclear warheads, fissile material, and nuclear capable missiles.

This could merit the opening of a US liaison office in Pyongyang and sanctions exemptions for some inter-Korean projects. But actual rollback of sanctions calls for further progress on denuclearization. Many analysts have argued that it was a mistake to hold the first Trump-Kim summit in Singapore before details were hammered out, because North Korea gained political legitimacy and enjoyed reduced international pressure but has since resisted actual denuclearization.

Meanwhile, North Korea's main agenda item for diplomatic summitry with the United States is economic cooperation. Kim devoted most of his highly anticipated 2019 New Year's address to promoting North Korea's economic potential. Pyongyang wants to profit from erosion of international sanctions and make resumption of "maximum pressure" difficult. And it wants to achieve this without military or political concessions, including on human rights, that could compromise regime control.

Two wildcard issues for a second Trump-Kim summit are peace and humanitarian assistance. Declaring peace is attractive to Trump as a way to leave his mark on history; aid is attractive to Kim so he can claim credit for improving citizens' lives. The trick is that Pyongyang wants to use a peace agenda to weaken Washington's alliance with Seoul, while there are American policymakers who see humanitarian assistance as a way to open up North Korea.

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Whatever the content of a second Trump-Kim agreement, to be successful, it will need South Korean coordination, Chinese enforcement, and Japanese support. But US-South Korean coordination is challenged by domestic politics and burden-sharing negotiations. Beijing is primarily concerned about its own security and trade interests. And South Korea-Japan relations are hampered by mismanagement of history issues and a radar-lock incident at sea.

Which raises the need for a South Korea-Japan summit that should have been held last year to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the bilateral partnership declaration. Although multilateral summits such as the G20 in Osaka in June 2019 provide opportunities for Moon and Abe to meet, a stand-alone summit is not in preparation. Absent creative thinking in Seoul and Tokyo, relations are likely to get worse. The Trump administration is scarcely engaged in bringing US allies together, and South Korea may use the 100th anniversary of the March 1st independence movement against Japanese imperialism as a reconciliation event with North Korea.

South Koreans and Japanese seemingly do not appreciate the strategic importance or goodwill of the other country, as reflected in recent government documents and public opinion polls. This is a mistake, especially for South Korea, which needs Tokyo's geopolitical and financial support. Rather than focus on when and how to welcome Kim Jong-un to Seoul, Moon's diplomatic energy would be better applied to visiting Japan to repair relations.

Ultimately, summits are limited in what they can accomplish. Such meetings are useful at focusing minds on efforts at negotiating "deliverables," and can provide green lights for working-level cooperation and coordination with third countries. But summits can only reach so far beyond domestic political constraints and only temporarily bridge gaps between national interests. To be successful in the course of history, leaders must do more than change the narrative — they need to implement improvements in policy by learning from past mistakes.

Leif-Eric Easley is associate professor of international studies at Ewha University in Seoul. He can be contacted at easley@post.harvard.edu.

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